

**R**heumatoid arthritis (RA) is an autoimmune disorder that usually affects small joints such as the fingers, wrists, and ankles, though larger joints like the hips and knees can also be affected.

The role of the body's immune system is to fight infections, but, in an autoimmune disorder, it starts to attack healthy tissue. RA targets the lining of the joints (the synovial membrane), causing it to become inflamed. The joint then starts to swell and becomes stiff and painful, in some cases reducing mobility.

Around 400,000 Australians suffer from RA, making it the second most common form of arthritis (after osteoarthritis), and Australia's most common autoimmune disease. The underlying cause is not well understood, but, like other autoimmune diseases, RA tends to run in families. It can occur

at any age, but appears most often between 35 and 64. Women are three times more likely to develop the disease than men, and also tend to develop it at an earlier age. Smoking has been shown to increase the risk of developing RA, and can significantly worsen its progression.

For most people, RA starts with pain and stiffness in the fingers. It may start suddenly, or develop gradually over several weeks or months. The symptoms are often put down to ageing. Flare-ups can happen with no obvious trigger and symptoms can disappear quite suddenly, often followed by months

or years with little inflammation. For about 20% of RA sufferers, the symptoms never reappear, but most will continue to experience flare-ups of varying severity between periods of improvement.

If you suspect you may be experiencing some of the symptoms of RA, it is important to seek medical advice as early as possible. There is no cure, but early treatment can help you manage the pain more effectively and minimise long-term joint damage. Exercise, massage and acupuncture may be useful and, depending on the severity of the condition, your doctor may prescribe medications as well.

There are two main classes of drugs that are commonly prescribed: nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), which are used to manage the pain and inflammation, and disease modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs), which work to alter the course of the disease and promote disease remission. One popular DMARD that reduces the activity of the immune system to lessen inflammation has recently come off patent, so generic forms are available. According to Arthritis Australia, over 70% of people with RA experience improvement with this treatment. For some, the arthritis goes into remission and virtually disappears.

DMARDs can be expensive, so generic forms are good news for

## SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Common symptoms of RA include:

- Swelling, pain and heat in the joints, usually symmetrical (affecting both sides of the body)
- Stiffness in the joints, especially in the morning or after inactivity
- Tenderness of the joints to touch
- Muscle weakness or aching
- Persistent fatigue
- Sleeping difficulties because of pain.

If you are experiencing these symptoms, discuss them with your National Pharmacies pharmacist or other healthcare professional.

those concerned about the financial burden of treatment. The lower price makes some consumers wary of generics, but the Australian Medical Association asserts that these drugs are closely regulated. By law, generic drugs are required to contain the same amount of the active ingredient(s) as their brand-name equivalent. They are less expensive only because manufacturers have not had all the start-up expenses of developing and marketing a new drug. ●

# FEELING creaky?

Sore joints, stiff movement, aching muscles... for some, these are not just part and parcel of getting older, they're symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis, discovers Rebecca Howden.

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